

CONNECTICUT Land Conservation Council

Testimony on Governor's House Bill No. 7027
Appropriations Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Esq., Executive Director
Connecticut Land Conservation Council
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Co-Chairs Formica, Osten and Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) concerning Governor's H.B. 7027, **An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June Thirtieth 2019, and Making Appropriations Therefor.** (Governor's Budget)

As the state's umbrella organization for the land conservation community, including its 137+/- land trusts, the Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) advocates for land conservation, stewardship and funding, and works to ensure the long-term strength and viability of the land conservation community in Connecticut.

CLCC submits this testimony on the Governor's Budget in connection with the following conservation priorities from our 2017 Conservation Agenda:

- Protect funding for the Council on Environmental Quality;
- Protect DEEP's overall budget from further cuts to ensure preservation of the agency's core programs and key environmental protection functions;
- Protect funding and capacity for DEEP to support our State Parks and Forests; and
- Pursue revenue-generating ideas and cost-avoiding proposals to mitigate the damage caused by cumulative reductions in general fund allocations to the agency.

CLCC Strongly Opposes the Elimination of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ)

The Governor's Budget proposes zero funding for the CEQ, and the budget implementer bill (Governor's Bill No. 7051) repeals the enabling statute (CGS section 22a-11) for the agency – effectively eliminating the CEQ.

Created in 1971, CEQ is the state's independent watch-dog agency that the public relies upon to, *inter alia*, monitor environmental progress, assess the efficacy of state environmental laws, policies and programs, and investigate alleged violations of environmental laws. CEQ services also include The Environmental Monitor (project information for the public under CEPA and for notices of proposed transfers of land), Annual Reports on Environmental Quality, Special Reports (most recently, "Energy Sprawl in Connecticut" ...), monthly meetings, and an opportunity for citizens to lodge complaints and otherwise voice concerns.

Acting through its volunteer council and just two staff, with limited support from DEEP for administrative purposes only, CEQ provides the public with these services efficiently, effectively and at minimal cost (\$174,000) to the state. There is likely no other state agency that does so much for so little.

We contend that the elimination of this critical agency would not result in any meaningful benefit to the state's budget or general operation -- with the public and the health of our environment paying the price. We respectfully request that funding be returned to the budget to support CEQ and its status be restored in the General Statutes so that it may continue to carry out its mission on behalf of the public interest.

CLCC strongly opposes budget cuts to the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection

Cumulative annual cuts to DEEP's budget have severely compromised the agency's ability to implement core programs and undertake key functions, including protection of the state's quality of clean air, water, wildlife, and recreational resources. The Governor's Budget proposes the elimination of an additional 24 full-time positions when DEEP has already lost over 200 positions over the past decade. With the agency already operating under one of the lowest levels of support in the nation, we are seriously concerned that continued cuts to DEEP's budget will lead to irreversible damage to the state's environment.

CLCC strongly opposes budget cuts Impacting State Parks, Forests & Campgrounds

CLCC is committed to supporting DEEP's natural resources programs to ensure the proper stewardship, management and inventorying of state conservation lands. We are therefore extremely concerned that further cuts to the agency's already bare-boned budget would render the State Parks system unsustainable. The Governor's Budget proposes to extend cuts from this year (FY 2017) which resulted in a 45% cut in seasonal workers; this means a loss of revenue, closure of 3 campgrounds, and reductions in services for the public across the state.

In addition to providing the public with affordable opportunities to recreate and enjoy our state's natural resources, Connecticut State Parks are economic drivers. They are investments worth protecting -- attracting 8 million annual visitors and generating over \$1 billion and 9,000 jobs for the state each year. For every \$1 spent on the State Parks, over \$38 is returned to Connecticut.

Yet, despite these economic benefits, our State Park system is chronically underfunded and now ranks 49th in the country in the percentage of the overall state budget that they receive. Connecticut is also one of only two states in the country that funds its State Parks exclusively through the General Fund (the other is Rhode Island).

CLCC strongly supports revenue-generating ideas to offset the proposed cuts

CLCC strongly supports establishing creative mechanisms, such as "Passports to the Parks", to offset the proposed cuts and generate new revenues dedicated for the purpose of supporting the operation and maintenance of our State Parks. We further contend that such funds (as well as those funds generated by State Parks and Campgrounds – approximately \$6 million/year) be placed in a dedicated, non-lapsing account to assure they are in fact used for those intended purposes.

In conclusion, at a time when the state is looking for strategies to attract new residents to the state, and keep current residents (particularly younger people) from leaving, we can ill-afford to turn our backs on the programs that safeguard our public health, enhance our quality of life and strengthen our local and state economies.

On behalf of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council, I thank you for this opportunity to provide our comments. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have and/or provide additional information about the wonderful work undertaken every day by our state's land trusts and conservation community.

